

## Latin American Catholics consider what's at stake in papal selection

The changing face of world Catholicism means that much is at stake for Catholics of the Global South as the Church prepares for its next spiritual leader. Latin American Catholics, who represent the Church's majority population, are calling out for a leader who, if not Latin American himself, will be able to engage with the cultural diversity of the 21st century Church.

Europeans, who a century ago comprised 65 percent of world Catholics, now represent less than a quarter of the Church's membership. Catholics of Latin America and the Caribbean have become the majority at 39 percent, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Many are hopeful that when the white smoke rises over the Sistine Chapel, Catholics will greet a new pope who reflects this evolving ethnic profile.

"There are people who long for a non-European pope, imploring the Holy Spirit to call an Asian, an African, an American, or why not a Latin American," said Oscar Elizalde, editor of *Vida Nueva* Colombia magazine and a researcher at the Universidad de La Salle.

Elizalde identifies with claims that the Church needs other leadership, "so that it can build bridges between Rome and diverse populations in newly Catholic nations."

Though the Latin American Catholic population is as diverse within itself as the religion as a whole, it faces regional issues that European remedies have been unable to solve. Elizalde emphasized the necessity of increased dialogue with women, indigenous peoples, Afro-Latin Americans and immigrants.

Xiskya Valladares, a Roman Catholic nun at the Pureza de Maria school in Nicaragua and acclaimed photojournalist, awaits a leader who is prepared to join with the Church in Latin America to solve long-standing problems. "I look for a pope who can help us fight poverty and ignorance," she said.

Valladares believes that tension is growing in Latin American Catholicism because of sects and incivility. She hopes for a pope who will encourage "a better spiritual and pastoral formation within the priesthood," and work toward healthier relationships across cultures and ethnic groups.

But Latin American Catholics like Valladares and Elizalde understand that no amount of rationalizing can guarantee a papal result. Additionally, the Church's commitment to the influence of the Holy Spirit makes criticism of the selected pope rare within the Catholic community.

"Cardinals can go back to their diocese and no one will accuse them of having voted the wrong way," said Dr. Jaime Lara, a former Yale professor.

Lara believes he speaks for much of the laity when he says that the ultimate selection will not make a real difference to Latin Americans living out the Catholic faith.

"I think they are looking for someone who can address the modern world, someone who is somewhat spontaneous and enthusiastic. Latinos would like someone of the personality of John Paul II, who is able to show his human side... But Latin Americans, in general, tend to live their Catholic lives without the intervention of bishops. They are aware of the pope. They pray for him. But they don't look to Rome for any leadership, maybe because communication was so sporadic in the early centuries of the Church," said Lara.

Latin American Catholics join with the rest of the Church's global population in hoping for a new pope who will be able to meet this new day of Catholicism with renewed energy and faithfulness. Understandably, many voices call out for a leader who represents their majority

culture and its particular needs, but Catholics have no means of questioning the Holy Spirit and College of Cardinals once a decision is made.

Regardless of who next heads the Roman Catholic Church, the realities of the Latin American Catholic lived experience will, for the most part, remain unchanged.

As Dr. Lara noted, “In Latin America, you live your life and you try to be a good Catholic. Everyday worship will go on as it always has.”

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